



Testimony to the Appropriations Committee
Office of Early Childhood - February 17, 2022

I am writing to comment on House Bill 5037 AAC the State Budget for the Biennium
Ending June 30th, 2023

From: Sophia Lampe
Director of Children & Family Services
SARAH Inc.
slampe@sarah-inc.org
1620 Boston Post Road
Westbrook, CT

To: Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Senator Miner, Representative France
and members of the Appropriations Committee:

My name is Sophia Lampe and I am the Director of Children & Family Services at SARAH Inc. We are a non-profit organization providing services to more than 1400 children and adults with differing abilities across 5 counties, in 50 towns, in Connecticut. I oversee this program.

SARAH Inc.'s KIDSTEPS program meets the developmental needs of infants and toddlers from birth to 3 years of age who have developmental delays, disabilities and/or Autism. Our team, like other providers in the state, are key partners with families to meet the needs of their children and to help them advance their development. This starts with evaluations and assessments, to treatment and developing and implementing a plan to help them transition to the community, outpatient services and/or school systems. **Our program is built around the foundation of a parent being a child's best advocate and it is our responsibility to provide parents with all the tools they need to best communicate about and advocate for their children. This is becoming more and more difficult with the funding challenges we are currently facing.**

Not identifying children in need of early intervention services or struggling to deliver services to those who are eligible, is not only tragic for the child, but has negative impacts for their communities and the economy. Nobel Prize winning economist John Heckman is known for his work on the economics of human potential. Making investments in early childhood education reduces deficits and strengthens the economy. "The highest rate of return in early childhood development comes from investing as early as possible. Starting at age three or four is too little too late, as it fails to recognize that skills beget skills in a complimentary and dynamic way. Efforts should focus on the first years for the greatest efficiency and effectiveness." John Heckman, December 7, 2012

Connecticut Birth to Three programs have not had a rate increase or rate review in the last 5 years, since rates were initially established in 2017, nor have programs received any direct ARPA payments to provide financial relief from COVID. Birth to Three programs are covering many expenses that are not reimbursable but nonetheless are necessary. Because we are a fee for service system, when families must cancel, a service cannot be provided but my program still must pay me for that planned time of day in spite of not having that revenue. Our program must still provide the technology and materials needed to do the work, whether families cancel or not. Our program cannot afford to absorb any more of these costs and neither can I. I'm here because I love working with the Birth to Three families, but something has to give. The infants, toddlers and their caregivers need it, want it and are entitled to the services I provide.

The next planned rate review is still 2 years away, meaning we will not have had any rate adjustments for **7 years!** Programs are dealing with the ever-increasing costs related to basic benefits for staff, including the challenge of paying competitive wages to attract and retain staff in times when there is also an extreme workforce shortage in early intervention. **WE NEED HELP.** In addition, the increased funding (4%) for non-profits agreed to last legislative session **DID NOT** include Birth to Three Services.

These funding challenges directly impact all Birth to Three programs in Connecticut and almost 10,000 children and families by extension. Staffing vacancies directly impact families which causes extreme service delays, staff burnout, and more.

In my role at SARAH Inc. I have struggled to meet the growing demands of training, technology, salaries, and benefits during the past 5 years of flat funding in our reimbursements. We are having a very hard time recruiting and retaining staff. Difficulty attracting new clinicians has resulted in a severe work force shortage. It takes months to identify qualified candidates. Low salaries, high travel costs, and procedural documentation/training are deterrents to clinicians joining the B23 workforce. **The work demands are not supported by the current rates.** As such, these clinicians are leaving EI services to join other sectors where they will receive higher salaries and better benefits such as schools, hospitals, clinics, and long-term care settings. Therapist burnout and high stress levels have had a huge impact while providing in-person and remote services with increasing caseloads. There have also been procedurally mandated increases in responsibilities, training, and other requirements without compensation. **All of these issues were already impacting our program, but the recent COVID pandemic has magnified these problems and made our current situation unsustainable.**

Connecticut is known across the country as one of the leaders in the provision of Early Intervention Services. Other states have acknowledged the value of these services and have invested more than Connecticut in their Early Intervention programs:

1620 Boston Post Road, Suite 200
Westbrook, CT 06498
P: (860) 399-1888 | F: (860) 399-0238
<http://sarah-inc.org>

Massachusetts:	19.5% rate increase over six years, averaging 3.25% per year. Additionally, millions in COVID relief funds were sent directly to providers.
Virginia:	Hourly rate is 23% higher than CT. Administrative payments to programs increased in 2019 from \$132 a month to \$242 a month (83% increase). CT's administrative/case management rate is \$100 per month and has been flat funded for 5 consecutive years.
Pennsylvania:	Annual average rate increase of 1.5 % for past 4 years.
New Jersey:	5% rate increase in 2021 and recent 2.5% increase in 2022.
Connecticut:	No funding increase in the last 5 years, no funding review scheduled for the next 2 years.

If something doesn't change quickly, Birth to Three programs in the state may need to close, and the families will not receive the services that they need and deserve in a timely way. **A recent survey among programs found that 40% of programs will be forced to close or reduce their capacity to serve families if reimbursement rates do not change.**

Please help SARA Inc. KIDSTEPS and other essential Birth to Three programs by:

- Including Birth to Three services as part of any Cost of Living Adjustment in the budget
- Revising regulations to provide timely and predictable rate increases for programs to account for doing business in Connecticut.
- Revising funding streams to support short-term and long-term General Administrative Payment increases.
- Immediately increasing Birth to Three rates by 10% to help sustain all Early Intervention agencies in Connecticut.

We respectfully ask that you remember SARA Inc. and other Birth to Three programs during the upcoming legislative session. We are providing essential services without adequate rates to sustainably continue to fund our services so we can continue to help this most vulnerable population in Connecticut.

Thank you,

Sophia Lampe